

The Clipper Visits The Cranberry Bogs

By JUDITH MONTMINY

What is delicate, needs pampering throughout the year, and is treated like a baby by its owners? The answer is not a purebred show dog nor a hothouse orchid. You may be surprised to learn that the focus of year-round T.L.C. is the cranberry bog and the red, bouncy fruit it produces.

One of the most familiar bogs in Duxbury is the one on Rte. 14, operated by the Crowell Cranberry Co. Inc. Cars are found parked along the bog in late October as tourists (and residents) try to get a better view of the cranberry harvesting. The scene is picturesque—the fall colored trees, the rich red of the cranberries, the water—all the makings of a New England postcard.

Wet Harvesting

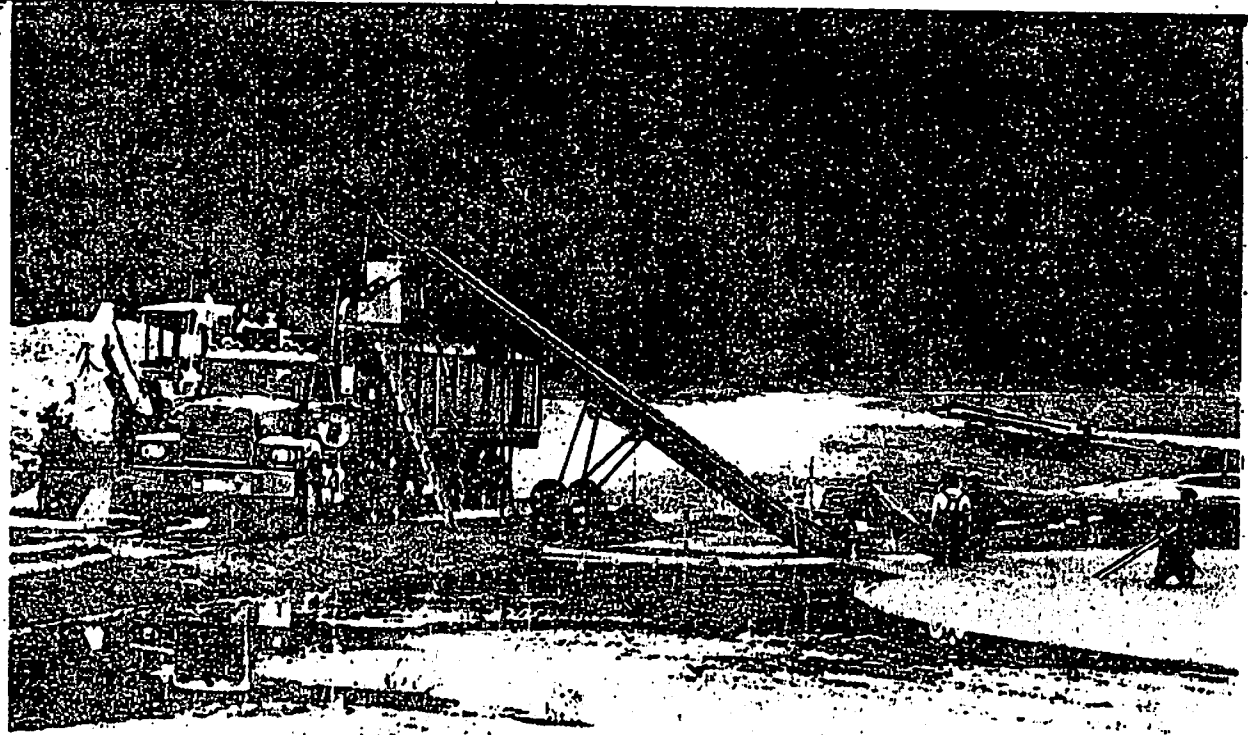
Cranberries used to be harvested by hand with a cranberry scoop. Then came dry harvesting, a method used for many years in Massachusetts. Only dry harvested cranberries are sold as fresh fruit in New England.

In recent years, wet harvesting has become popular. First developed in Wisconsin, the wet method increases a grower's yield about 15%. In dry harvesting, the weather conditions have to be perfect. Even though a day may be sunny, if the dew is still on the vines, the dry harvesting cannot be done. With wet harvesting, the grower determines when the berries will be picked because he controls the conditions.

The bogs are flooded to a depth of about 18 inches. The large egg-beater-like machines churn up the water and dislodge the berries from the vines. The berries float to the top and are corralled to shore. After this corraling (called booming or rafting) takes place, the berries are pushed onto elevators and into waiting trucks. The detrashers on the elevators clean the berries of leaves and undergrown fruit.

According to Jack Canny of Ocean Spray (a cooperative of growers), about 80% of the bogs in Massachusetts are now wet harvested.

Laurence Pink, a Duxbury resident with about 100 acres of bogs in Duxbury and Middleboro, was one of the first in this area to use the wet harvesting method 14 years ago. Working on his family's bogs since he was a boy, Pink has seen a dramatic increase in yields since he began using the wet harvest method.



Loading cranberries at Crowell's bog.

Photo by Fran Nichols

Increased Yield

Another Duxbury grower, Earle Ricker, is using the

well-known method for the first time this year. He, too,

has seen almost a 50% increase in cranberry yield over

the past few years. He attributes the increase to

technological developments. "Until 5 or 6 years ago,

the cranberry business had some terrible years." In the

30's the market was good. Although the production

was lower, the grower received a good return on his

product. Ricker says the fall in return was due to over-

production. Recently, however, there has been a boom

in the cranberry business.

Most growers are trying to increase the production

of the bogs they already own. The Cranberry Ex-

perimental Station in Wareham (an extension of

UMass) helps growers with advice and notifies them of

the latest technological developments. "I like the

cranberry business," says Ricker. "There is always

something new to deal with."

Most cranberry bogs have been in the family for

years. Ricker notices a camaraderie between growers,

especially between the members of the Ocean Spray

cooperative.

But Ocean Spray, although the largest, is not the

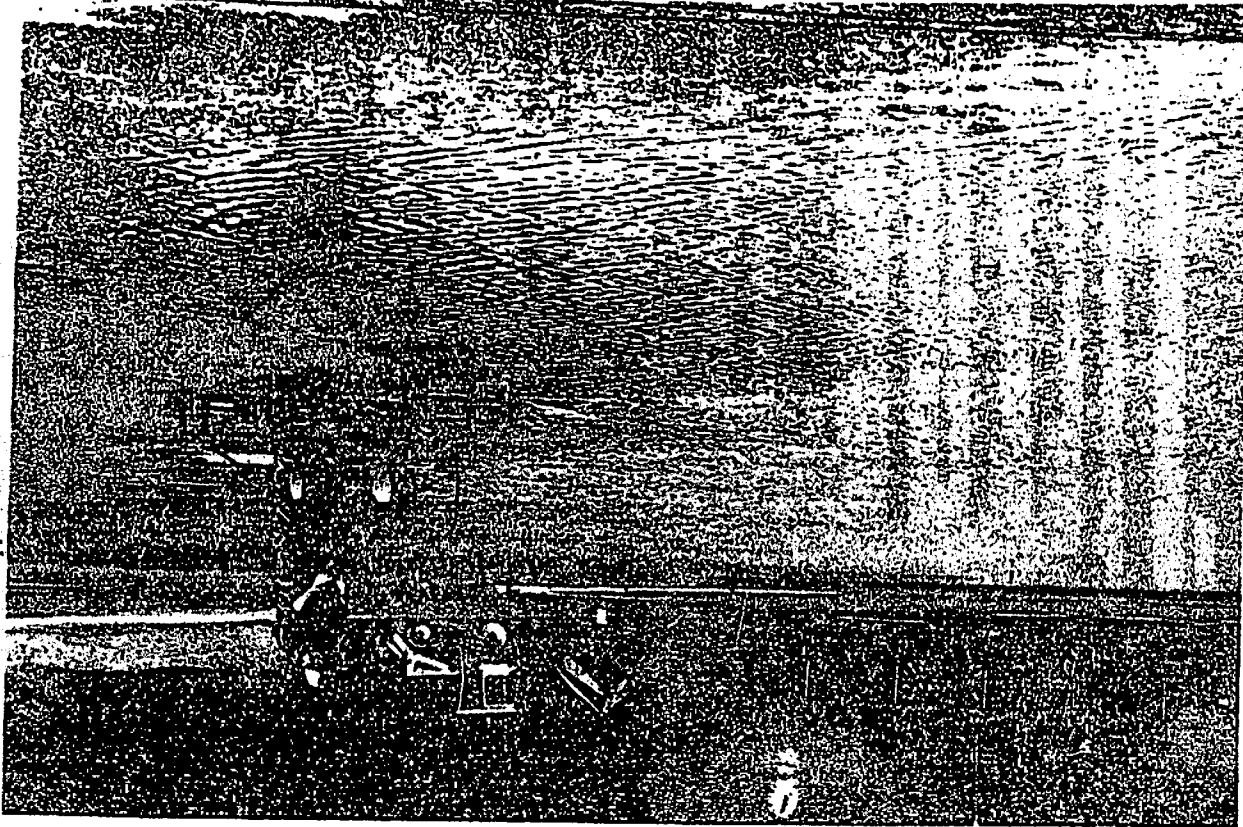
only game in town. Other companies who market

cranberries are Decas Cranberry Sales Co., Peter

LeSage Inc., Cape Cod Cranberry Coop, Cumberland

A water reel in operation.

Photo by Fran Nichols



Farms, Apple and Eve, and Welch's.

If a grower is a member of Ocean Spray, however, he delivers his berries to the plant in Middleboro. Every berry delivered today is either canned, bottled, or frozen by tomorrow. The only exceptions are made for the berries to be used as fresh fruit. They are handled slightly differently.

Maintaining Bogs

Everyone notices the harvesting of cranberries, yet it is the maintenance of the bogs before and after harvesting that determines whether or not a grower will have a successful yield. What we do not often see is the cleaning of the ditches and the repairing of the equipment before winter frost arrives. The bogs are flooded to protect the vines and sand is spread on the ice.

Once the winter is over, the bogs are treated with fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. The entire irrigation system is checked. Between May 1 and June 15 there remains the constant threat of frost on the bogs. Often the irrigation systems are turned on to keep the sprinklers going. The constant flow of water keeps the temperature of the bog at 32F. After June 15, however, the bogs are free from frost.

During the summer, the irrigation system is used to reduce the temperatures around the bog area or to offset a dry spell.

The cranberry business faces a constant battle with bugs. Fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are used throughout the growing season. Everyone we talked with — growers, Ocean Spray spokesmen, etc. — emphasized that the chemicals used by the cranberry industry are safe, well-tested, and government-approved.

Bogs Sometimes Abused

Cranberries can last forever if cared for properly. That is why growers are careful to rejuvenate the old vines and try to promote new growth. One section of the Rte. 14 bog is over 100 years old.

Imagine growing a crop that does not have to be replanted each year? Yet the cranberry bog's hardiness is offset by its susceptibility to frost and other influences.

Orrin Colley of the Cranberry Institute, headquartered in Duxbury, points out that cranberry bogs are often abused by those who let their dogs run on the bogs, by golfers who practice their swings across the bogs, by kids hunting for frogs, and by motorbikers who ride around the bogs. Colley has seen 10 and 12-year olds riding mopeds in the bog areas. Even the kids who pitch stones do not realize that those stones can

become caught in expensive machinery and often lead to costly repairs.

Vandalism is a concern in the cranberry business since many people look upon cranberry bogs as recreational areas, not as private property.

It is the bog owner who, ultimately must bear the burden of maintaining the bogs.

Cranberry Growers vs. Developers

Another problem faced by bog owners is the development of land. In 1956, over 490 acres of Duxbury land was used for growing cranberries. Now, a little over 300 acres are producing fruit.

Some principal growers in Duxbury are Crowell Cranberry Co., Farle Ricker, Beaton Cranberry Co., Laurence Pink, Edward Koplovsky, E.W. Loring Inc., and Stanley Merry.

Duxbury does not have any large bogs compared to a town like Carver, dubbed the cranberry capital of the world. One bog in Carver measures 76 acres.

According to Canny at Ocean Spray, the problem with Duxbury is that people tend to move here. He has seen similar problems on the Cape as well. Sometimes water rights become a major issue.

The homes built around a bog crowd the bog. Cranberry bogs must be sprayed, a practice that may be of concern to some homeowners. Canny says the growers are extremely careful with the chemicals they use, and says that despite the abandonment of some bogs, "The cranberry business has done very well. We do plan to do better."

The Elements

One of the reasons the cranberry business is doing so well is because of record crops in recent years. But, as with any other agricultural business, growers are dependent upon the natural elements. Cranberries need water and sunshine. The water can be provided by the growers through irrigation systems; the sunshine cannot.

This year the bogs looked good in the spring. The blooms were prolific and the berries were set, but due to adverse weather conditions, many berries stopped growing. It is still too early to tell, but it looks as if this year will not top last year for cranberry production. (An excellent year will yield about 195 barrels/acre. From Duxbury, Ocean Spray expects an average yield of 120 barrels/acre this year.)

Through aggressive marketing techniques and an increase in the demand for cranberry juice products, the industry is experiencing an upswing. The future looks good. Grower returns have shot up dramatically in the last few years and the trend appears to be continuing.

The cranberry business is growing rapidly and technology is helping growers with their bogs. In years past, if there was a frost warning, the grower would have to activate his pumps immediately to flood the bog and protect the vines. Now he can push a button and the sprinkler systems start to work. Laurence Pink sees computers making a mark on the industry. Some frost systems are now triggered by a sensor that automatically turns on the pumps. At one of his bogs, there is a telephone in a special box. When the temperature drops to a certain level, the telephone calls Pink and a mechanical voice tells him the temperature at the bog. Sound like science fiction?

Perhaps. But Pink says he still has to go out and physically check the operation. The cranberry business is still a family business and the diehard growers who did not give up during the hard times won't let go of their bogs now. "Money is no object," says Pink.

While talking to different growers, this reporter found that every one of them spoke about their bogs and about the cranberry business with a true sense of pride and affection. Perhaps that is why they are growing cranberries, the fruit that grows up on tender loving care.